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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: DAS BRYZA MEETS WITH JOINT OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On May 9, EUR DAS Matthew Bryza, Ambassador Tefft, and EU Special Representative Peter Semneby met three leaders of the Joint Opposition, MP David Gamkrelidze, Salome Zourabichvili, and MP Levan Gachechiladze. Gamkrelidze focused on current problems with the election process and Saakashvili's alleged "broken promise" to ensure the fair elections that Gamkrelidze says are the only remedy to the political situation. He claimed that Saakashvili is "preparing people for war" and using tension with Russia for long-term public relations gain. He said international observers could help ensure fairness in the election and urged them to go to places of concern from the last election; the Ambassador said we were planning to do just that. Zourabichvili and Gachechiladze accused the UNM of rigging the elections and the U.S. of allowing it to happen. Bryza and the Ambassador countered the allegations, pointing to ongoing U.S. assistance of some 6 million USD for elections in Georgia. All three opposition leaders denied there was a real crisis in Abkhazia, and discounted Russia's April 20 shooting down of a Georgian UAV. Bryza told the group that violence and threats of violence are unacceptable in a democracy. Semneby added that the EU is also watching events in Georgia and is bringing in experts to intensively engage Georgian authorities on democratic development and fair elections. End summary.

Gamkrelidze Details Concerns

12. (C) On May 9, EUR DAS Matthew Bryza, Ambassador Tefft, and EU Special Representative Peter Semneby met with Joint Opposition leaders MP David Gamkrelidze (New Rightists), Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), and MP Levan Gachechiladze (United National Council of Opposition). EUR/CARC Conflicts Advisor Michael Carpenter also attended. Gamkrelidze said Saakashvili had created a new constitution and electoral system after the January presidential election, but had not met any opposition demands. (Note: This is not entirely true. The GOG did lower the parliamentary threshold to 5 percent, added opposition members to the district election commissions, and replaced the Director and Board of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. End note.) This led to the failed hunger strike that further damaged the opposition. Gamkrelidze said the current electoral process is not fair. He claimed seven MPs (including himself) were refused access to official buildings to observe whether government institutions are wrongfully conducting political activity on behalf of the ruling United National Movement (UNM). He also said that the cameras monitoring polling stations should be focused on those which experienced unusually high turnout during the presidential election. Gamkrelidze claimed people are scared, especially of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

13. (C) Gamkrelidze believed that Saakashvili was manipulating events prior to elections in order to gain more votes. He compared current tension over Abkhazia with the 2006 spy scandal, when Saakashvili ordered four Russian spies out of

the country 10 days prior to local elections. He claimed the resulting Russian embargo cost Georgia millions of dollars in lost trade. (Note: Gamkrelidze did not comment on the fact that it was Russia that shot down a Georgian drone on April 120. End note.) While not discounting the real danger Georgia faced in Abkhazia, Gamkrelidze cautioned that it was dangerous to capitalize on international events during an election campaign. He said that although Georgia has had competitive elections, they have not had a fair one. Gamkrelidze appealed to international bodies to ensure fairness this time around, as he insisted truly fair elections are the only remedy to the domestic political tension. He asked the international community to monitor the areas in which there were problems during the January 5 presidential elections. Ambassador Tefft said the Embassy was planning to do just that.

Zourabichvili, Gachechiladze Hurl Rhetoric

14. (C) Zourabichvili dismissed concerns about Russian actions in Abkhazia, claiming that the tension over the current situation was "created in Georgia, not Russia." She alleged that the current standoff with Russia is "a ploy between two undemocratic countries." She believes the U.S. is seeing only one side as the aggressor and that Russia had been doing this for 15 years. Zourabichvili asserted Saakashvili was playing up tensions in Abkhazia for domestic consumption, as he cannot win a democratic election otherwise. She questioned why there was no U.S. reaction on Georgia's constitutional amendments on Parliamentary representation, nor on the creation of single-mandate majoritarian districts.

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She alleged that people believe the U.S. allowed the UNM to rig the presidential elections and are wondering whether the U.S. will again this time.

15. (C) When Bryza asked her to describe her party's platform, Zourabichvili said it was to "save Georgia from a dictatorship." Bryza rebutted this as rhetoric, not a platform. Gamkrelidze detailed points of his platform for his majoritarian race in Tbilisi's Vake district, including preventing a war in Abkhazia, protecting his supporters' votes, and stopping Saakashvili's alleged oppression. Other ideas focused on tenets of liberal democracy, such as ensuring media freedom, and an independent judiciary and Parliament.

16. (C) Gachechiladze blamed Bryza for the lack of coverage of his campaign on Mze and Rustavi-2 television channels. He alleged Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava is using his office's budget to finance all of the UNM's majoritarian candidates. Gachechiladze claimed Interior Minister Merabishvili is controlling everything on TV, and that the U.S. is allowing this to happen. He claimed 200,000 people would come into the streets after the election to stop Saakashvili's government from getting away with unfair elections.

Ambassador Refutes Arguments

17. (C) The Ambassador told Gachechiladze that he had missed some points. First, Imedi TV returned to the air in December only after DAS Bryza's and the Embassy's intensive efforts. He said the Imedi journalists later quit of their own free will (after seeing deceased owner Badri Patarkatsishvili attempting to co-opt a government official with \$100 million USD.) Consequently, it is not the U.S.' fault Imedi TV was not broadcasting. The Ambassador also pointed out that UNM's polls show the UNC is losing support, especially after making radical threats against the government. Gachechiladze only replied that he thinks 200,000 people will come out on the streets. The Ambassador said Embassy efforts to promote free media and fair elections also include recent intervention on the denial of Maestro TV's (a company partly owned by

Gachechiladze's brother) application to broadcast news, and public statements by the MOIA and police acknowledging they have no role in the election process.

Bryza: No Violence, No Threats

18. (C) Bryza told the opposition leaders that violence and threats of violence are unacceptable in a democratic election and would be opposed by Georgian society. While the opposition was asking the U.S. to judge the campaign, Bryza said we must also judge the opposition's statements about using violence against government officials. Gachechiladze accused the U.S. of ignoring violent dispersal of protesters in Georgia in November 2007 and in Armenia in March following the presidential elections. Bryza countered that his, and the Embassy's, statements against the use of violence on November 7 were very clear. Bryza reminded the group that violent protests must be kept out of the current election process as well, including after the election.

Bryza: New Forum Needed on Abkhazia

19. (C) On Abkhazia, Bryza underlined the dangerous position into which Russia is putting Georgia. He said it appears Putin has tried to create a win-win for himself by ratcheting up the tension with Georgia over the breakaway region. Given the current situation, Bryza said the UN Group of Friends is not advancing the peace process and a new, complementary forum is needed to provide Georgia with advice and funding for the implementation of its peace initiatives for Abkhazia.

Embassy Observers, Static and Roving

110. (C) The Ambassador told the opposition leaders we would send some 30 teams across the country to observe elections, with a focus on the areas where we had seen problems during the presidential election. He noted that our observers would combine static teams with roving teams to ensure that teams can monitor individual precinct election commissions (PECs) from open to close. Gamkrelidze asked to share his list of problematic PECs and the Ambassador said the Embassy would review it and use it as a basis to assign teams to the most troublesome areas. (Note: When Gamkrelidze provided this list, all but one were already designated to be visited by Embassy observers. End note.) Zourabichvili said the opposition does not trust exit polls. The Ambassador

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confirmed we will not be funding exit polls. Rather, U.S. assistance is going toward, among other things, Parallel Turnout Tabulation and Parallel Vote Tabulation efforts, conducted by local NGOs.

Semneby on EU Efforts

111. (C) Semneby said the EU is watching internal events and Abkhazia closely. He said the Netherlands had offered to bring observers who are well versed in identifying election malfeasance. He said the Speaker of the Polish Senate, Bogdan Borusiewicz, is coming to visit Georgia and offer support for continuing democratic development. Semneby noted that the opposition was "asking a lot" and while the EU could and would help in many areas, some requests were not practicable. Zourabichvili chided Semneby, saying only an international observer watching the CEC Chairman all night would protect the opposition's votes. Semneby responded that the EU was really trying to offer a facilitation with the government and all parties in building democratic institutions.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) After the meeting, Gachechiladze attacked the U.S. in the media, saying "They (the U.S.) are lobbying Saakashvili's administration, like the Central Committee was lobbying its secretaries in Georgia from the Kremlin during Soviet times. We won't take instructions from the U.S." And even before the meeting, Zourabichvili told reporters, "The key issue of the meeting will be whether Bryza again plans to rig our elections together with Saakashvili or not." It is clear that a decreasingly popular opposition is trying to foment anti-Americanism in order to drum up support in the elections. We believe it important to engage them and hear out their concerns, but are frustrated by their lack of platform or agenda. Their main platform is anger toward Saakashvili, which has dissipated considerably since the crisis last fall, according to the most reliable polling. While the opposition's support continues to drop -- Zourabichvili's party did not even register one percent support on the latest IRI poll -- we can expect more attempts to lash out at us and others, which we will continue to counter with reasoned, fact-based arguments. End comment. TEFFT